Time: A Sikh Perspective

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Janamsakhis narrate accounts of Guru Nanak's travels. Simple sentences during conversation with saints, common folks and Bhai Mardana ji, Guru's friend and disciple, unveil the mysteries of the Unseen many a times. The Guru along with Bhai Mardana was moving towards Sri Lanka, far remote South corner of India. Bhai Mardana asked the Guru one day, "How many *Kos* (a measure about 1.5 miles) we have traveled Baba? How much far from Talwandi (native village of the Guru and Bhai Mardana) are we now? The Guru said, "Don't calculate brother, remember God alone".

Days, weeks, months and years passed. One day Bhai Mardana said, "How many years have gone Baba since we left Talwandi?" The Guru said, "Once I told you brother don't calculate."

Professor Puran Singh in some other context writes in the *Spirit of the Oriental Poetry*,

> 'Lands and continents could not hold me,
> I was too much, too much for space.
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> Centuries and ages couldn't contain me,
> I was too much too much for time.'

The Guru along with Bhai Mardana was traveling on the banks of river *Kurram*, in Afghanistan when Bhai Mardana said, "I feel tired Master. Let us take rest for a while." They sat under the shadow of a tree. After sitting for a while Bhai Mardana laid down on the ground. The Guru moved near him, placed his hand on his forehead, felt that the Bhai had an attack of fever. The Guru placed head of Bhai Mardana in his lap and said, "Thou art departing brother. Ask for something" The brother kept silence. The Guru again said, "Desire anything Bhai ji, we shall fulfill your wish." Bhai Mardana said, "I have nothing to ask for. I am a contented man. I am leaving this earth lying in your lap Master, what else?" The Baba said, "So what brother, we shall not let you go empty handed. Utter a word and get the desire fulfilled. Name anything on or above this earth and get it."

The Bhai said, "Thou art God's minstrel Baba. Thy minstrel I am. You know God; you have achieved Him, the world moves according to your will. I know you Master, I have achieved you and you do what I want. This day, this moment I have a prayer to say before you. Don't depart me away from you, neither in this world nor in the next world". The Guru said, "We will shower our blessings upon you brother. We will reside there where you go." The Guru blessed him and Bhai Mardana left this mundane world. These are the last words of a disciple. This is the Will of a seer.

I was telling my friends that Bhai Mardana served the Guru for forty six years since his childhood to death. A listener said, "How can we calculate duration of his company with the Guru? Did he left the Guru and returned back to village? He left his body during the journey and in his will he desired not to be parted from the Guru. Time and again the Guru advised the brother not to calculate. To calculate is, to measure the immeasurable, to fathom the unfathomable."

The *Vedic Rshis* (seers) were aware of the changing nature of the universe. They knew that to change means to perish. They termed time as *Kal*. The word Kal means time and it means death too. So the seers never differentiated between time and death. Birth and death occur in a continuum while wheel of time moves round and round. Anything which gets changed is not real, it is an illusion. *Rshis* desired to enter the ream of permanence. Time not only changes itself very fast it compels other things to change. It is the prime mover. How can one reach the permanent realm of reality while moving? The seer asks, "What was there when there was nothing? Darkness engulfed in darkness was floating upon the waters unfathomable. The Creator alone knows about it or does He know not?"[1] These are simple queries of ancient Indian thinkers, no answers. Who can boast to answer these questions to date?

Sanskrit root *Kal* means time, duration, age, fraction of time, season, end, death, doomsday, god of death (*yama*), famine, *Shiva* etc.[2] According to Apte , *Kal* means black or dark blue color, one among the nine substances of *Vaisheshak* school, the god of destruction, destiny, merchant of whisky, unit of time etc.[3]

Indian thinkers didn't believe in the continuity of time. To them every moment is complete in itself and never resembles with another moment. Therefore, Indian seers never took interest in the philosophy of history as occidentals did. Indians considered every moment independent, strange and perishable. Perishable moments cannot create or

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[1] Rg. 10.129.3
[2] Srivastava, M.L., Gyan Shabad Kosh
[3] Apte, V.S., Sanskrit Etymology

shape history. No wonder why Indians showed no interest in recording events of history systematically. *Rshis* concealed their identities while writing something about spirituality. According to them, the soul or its experience was important not the body where the soul resides.

While examining the Jain and Buddhist texts, I came to the conclusion that the Jain scholars tried to understand and define time through measurable units. A *pran*, the smallest unit, is a small fraction of a moment which after being consumed into the higher and bigger units leads to infinite time cycle but according to them this infinite time cycle can also be measured. So nothing in this world is immeasurable within time and space. Jain theory of time is endless calculation after calculation.

For the first time in Indian history the Buddhists evolved complete philosophy of time. Buddha perceived life transitory, brief and limited. Neither existence nor self is permanent. Personality is nothing but a stream of senses. A person is a name only, a phenomenon, nothing more nothing less. Self is the mother of confusions. Awakening of self actually means destruction of self. Let nobody keep any doubt about the fading nature of the cosmos.[4]

Let us go through a few sentences from the Buddhist text:

-Beings possess a short life span. None ever escaped death.[5]
-Brahma also said his life span is small, whose one day is equal to our one thousand years.[6]
-Life is like a dew drop, a bubble floating upon the surface of water.[7]
-Length of life is exactly equal to the length of a thought.[8]

Saying so Buddha concludes, "Life is a name given to a thought. Where is life? When you utter a word or sentence about life, it is in fact a thought of life, not life itself, there is no existence whatsoever, there is no self, no soul. A transitory thought process moves like a river and rinses surroundings. Let us get rid of this all. A saint finds his own moment, catches it and gets liberated. The saint rests. To rest means to get liberated. "There is no difference between a moment and an age", says Buddha, "Blessed is the moment which knows this, for it becomes an age. Cursed is the age which couldn't know this; it will perish like a moment. "

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[4] Majhhim Nikaya, 1.135
[5] Samyut Nikaya, 1.108
[6] Samyut Nikaya, 1.143
[7] Anguttar Nikaya, 4.137
[8] Vishuddhi Magg, 231

A lion digests his prey, similarly the Buddha assimilates ages.

Anything knowledgeable is an illusion, say the Orientals. An object, knowledge of the object and the knower, all are *maya*. Who will know time? Anything perceived and anything explained is far from the truth. The Sikh scripture declares, "You can't utter half of a letter about truth," saying so Gurbani flows through 1430 pages. Here Sikh thought is a reverse of what Buddha said. The Guru says, a part of perfection is perfection in itself. Perceive the world minus God, it is illusion, perceive the world, God residing in it, see the Reality. True is this hut and Truth resides in it.

Japu starts with the couplet

> *Adi sach* || *Jugadi sach*||
> *Hai bhi sach*|| *Nanak hosi bhi sach* ||

The term *Jugadi* stands for past, beginning of the ages, *hai bhi* is the present time and *hosi bhi* is the future. Three tenses are complete. What does the term *adi* stand for? It is the realm beyond time and beyond space, beyond the beyond. The three dimensional tree of space and time emerges out of *Adi Sach*. Sperm enters into the egg to make it a zygote, embryo develops and a child takes birth. The child grows up and there is no gap in the time process. Gap means death, may it be a gap of a fraction of a second. Gurbani tells, "Colorful moment when breaks, the strong chain of life breaks and the god of death shows its face.[9]

Why we love our past may it be painful? Why we refuse to love future how much sure it may appear to bring prosperity for us? This is because we know our past where as future is unknown to us, a stranger, completely uncertain. Good or bad we love our friends because we know them. Ignorance about future inspires less frightens more. Let me quote McTaggart here,

> Past, present and future are mere relations. They do not belong to time *per se* but only in relation to a knowing object. If there were no knowing objects, nothing would be in any sense past, present, future, we may still have the perception of events as earlier and later, it is not essentially to know them in time.[10]

To think about eternity means to know beyond time. Logically it appears that one must know time first. Can we perceive time? Nikodmus wants to know about spirituality when Christ asks, "Wind starts flowing at its own will. You feel its sound but you can't decide from where it comes and where it goes. What will you say about it?

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9 ਭੰਨੀ ਘੜੀ ਸਵੰਨਵੀ ਟੂਟੀ ਨਾਗਰ ਲਜ ॥ ਅਜਰਾਈਲ ਫਰੇਸਤਾ ਕੈ ਘਰਿ ਨਾਠਿਆ ਅੱਜ ॥
10 McTaggart, E.M.E., The Nature Of Existence, 1927, Page 237

Nikodmus- How it happens?

Jesus- You, the master of Israel, know not the simple things. How will you believe when I tell you about spirituality?[11]

The interference of time in our daily curriculum never ends. An incident evolves; another incident arises before completion of the previous one and so on, endlessly. . We not only desire, we want our wishes to be fulfilled without delay, just now, immediately. This does not happen always, the result never comes according to our ambitions, hence, a theory of *nishkaam karma*, act only, and act without desiring the fruit of efforts.

An incident comes after another means one present succeeds another present. High ideals in fact are a few trials to change the course of bad future. The Guru says "after sowing seeds of thorny tree why expect sweet fruits?" Man never blames himself. After committing a crime, facing punishment the criminal sighs, "This was my destiny." The Guru says, "Bad deeds appeal to you more, good deeds you dislike, I am seeing the miracles of Satan everyday."[12]

Present is a word used for a subtle wave of mind. A point in geometry is an existence without any dimension; it can be extended to any direction, lengthwise breadth wise, up or down. Like a point you can't measure the present, neither you can preserve it. We can stretch our present towards past through memory and towards future through our imagination. We see the present face to face no doubt but it is vanishing in a horrible speed disabling us to see it clearly. Gurbani says, it is not time that changes, it is the mind which is changing.[13] Now the question is, can we separate time from mind or mind from time? Time and mind both powerful rivers meet each other, the world trembles while floating in them. Time is a process of knowing, it is not knowledge, it is the process not result of the process. Like a pendulum, present oscillates into past and future within fraction of a second.

This much is enough about time (Kal). What is *Akal* (Eternity)? Eternal existence is the life flowing autonomously without caring for past, present or future. The past, recorded and decorated by the historian and the future well designed by the planner are caretaker temporary arrangements considered useful for routine life. The Guru says, if you have the yearning to be an *akali* (personality beyond time and space) throw your knowledge into the winds, throw the corpse of past into the ocean of higher consciousness, jump into the Unknown and swim. To keep savings in the banks, to collect countless articles in the

[11] N.T. John, 3-8:10
[12] Ramkali, M.5, GG-892
[13] GG. Page 944

stores means you are denying the reality of death. After practicing yoga, the Guru says, if you stretch this life span to a thousand years, what is significant in it?[14] Spring comes only after fall of all the dead leaves. Stitching life like sewing a torn cloth is not the project of a healthy person. Personal temporal existence dissolves unto the infinite absolute ocean of eternity, becomes not a part of ocean but ocean itself, omniscient, inseparable, immeasurable, in constant continuity, no mind or body, no soul and God, nothing personal or impersonal, no divisions or subdivisions, all become One. The awakened man always exists in Eternal Now. At this stage Guru Nanak says to Bhai Mardana, "Calculate not brother, you are beyond calculations, you are beyond the beyond."

[14] GG – Page 14